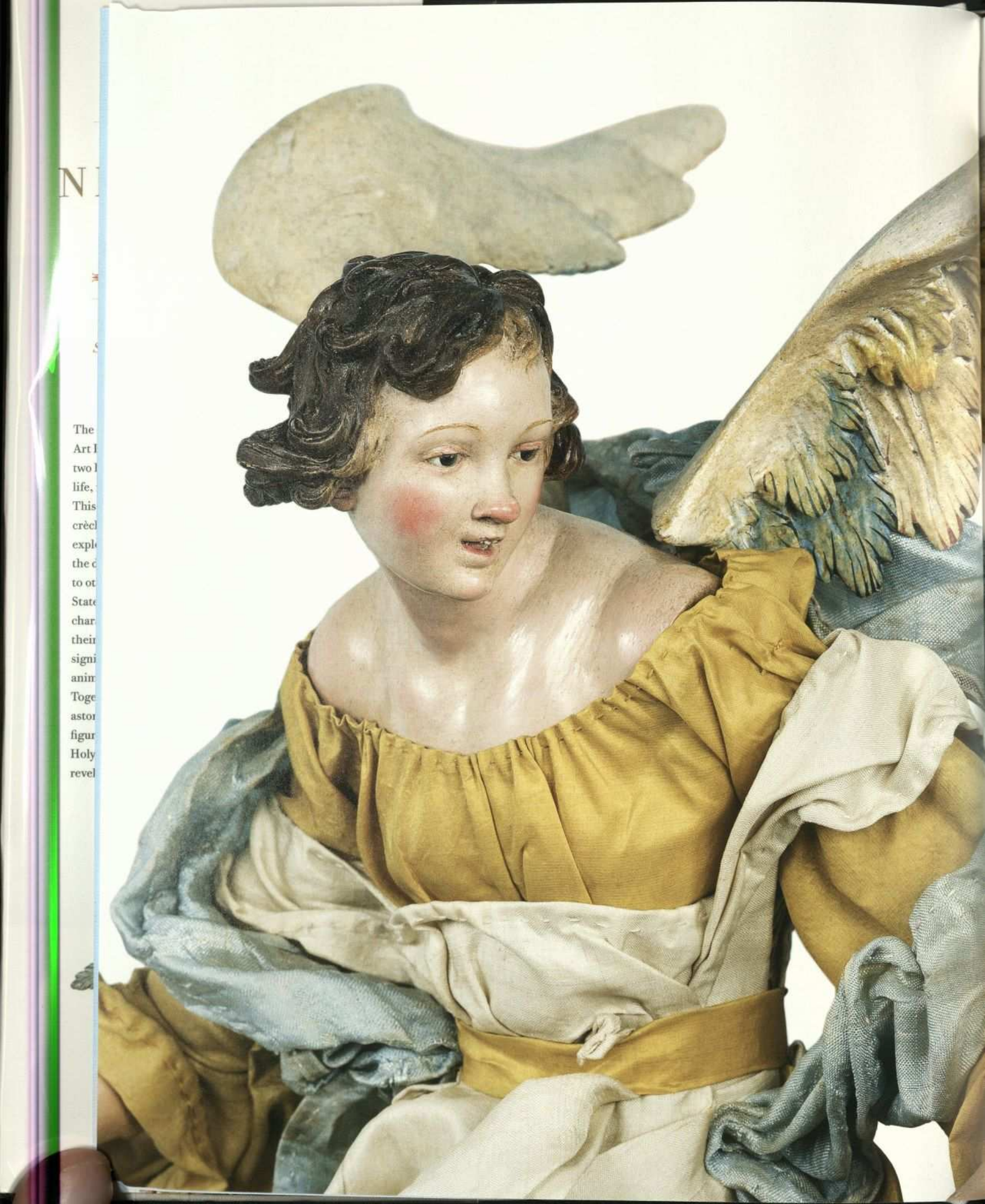

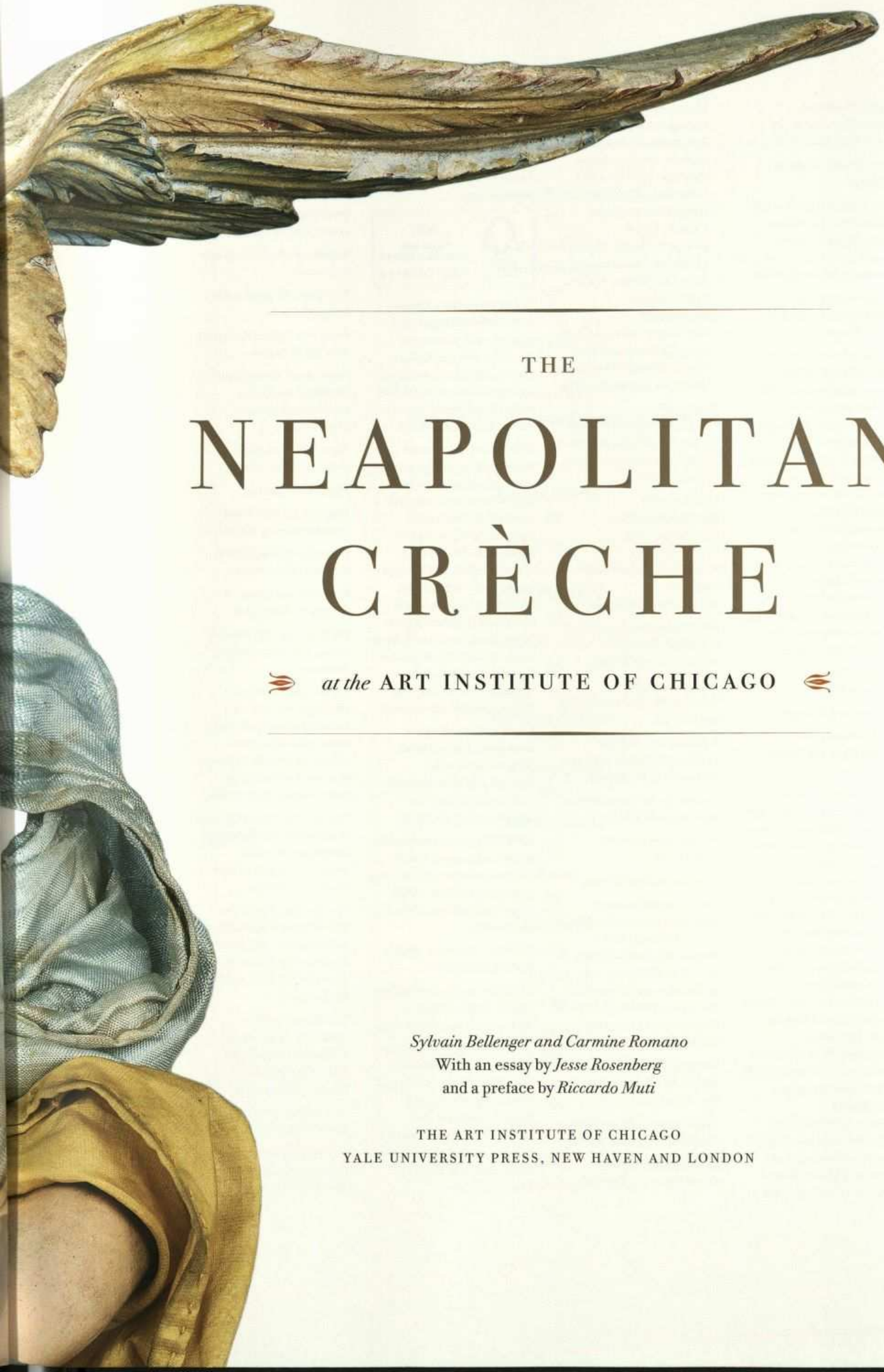

THE

NEAPOLITAN CRÈCHE

at the ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Sylvain Bellenger and Carmine Romano
With an essay by *Jesse Rosenberg*
and a preface by *Riccardo Muti*

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO
YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, NEW HAVEN AND LONDON

This publication is generously sponsored by Mr. and Mrs. James N. Bay.

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Riccardo Muti's preface and Sylvain Bellenger's essay, "The Scenography of the Neapolitan Crèche," were translated by Timothy Stroud.

Carmine Romano's entries were translated by Antony Shugaar.

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First edition
Printed in Italy

ISBN: 978-0-300-22235-7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Art Institute of Chicago, author. | Bellenger, Sylvain. | Romano, Carmine. | Rosenberg, Jesse. | Muti, Riccardo, writer of preface.
Title: The Neapolitan crèche at the Art Institute of Chicago / Sylvain Bellenger and Carmine Romano ; with an essay by Jesse Rosenberg and a preface by Riccardo Muti.
Description: Chicago, Illinois: Art Institute of Chicago, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: LCCN 2016042069 | ISBN 9780300222357 (hardback)
Subjects: LCSH: Crèches (Nativity scenes)—Italy—Naples—Catalogs. | Art objects, Italian—Italy—Naples—Catalogs. | Art objects—Illinois—Chicago—Catalogs. | Art and music—Italy—Naples—History—18th century—Catalogs. | BISAC: ART / Collections, Catalogs, Exhibitions / General. | ANTIQUES & COLLECTIBLES / Figurines. | DESIGN / Decorative Arts. | HISTORY / Modern / 18th Century.
Classification: LCC N8065 .A78 2016 | DDC 704.9/48560945731—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2016042069

Published by
The Art Institute of Chicago
111 South Michigan Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60603–6404
www.artic.edu

Distributed by
Yale University Press
302 Temple Street
P.O. Box 209040
New Haven, Connecticut
06520–9040
www.yalebooks.com/art

Produced by the Department of Publishing at the Art Institute of Chicago

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Vice President for Publishing and Design

Edited by Amy R. Peltz and Gregory Nosan with the assistance of Elissa Park

Production by Joseph Mohan and Lauren Makholm

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Unless otherwise noted, photography of works of art is by Clare Britt, Aidan Fitzpatrick, Jordan Fuller, and Chris Gallagher, with postproduction by Jonathan Mathias and Shelby Silvernell, Department of Imaging, the Art Institute of Chicago.

Designed and typeset in ITC Bodoni by the Grillo Group, Inc., Hinsdale, Illinois

Separations by Professional Graphics, Rockford, Illinois

Printing and binding by Conti Tipocolor, Florence

This book was made using paper and materials certified by the Forest Stewardship Council, which ensures responsible forest management.

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The Art Institute's crèche is from the mid-eighteenth through early nineteenth centuries and was made in Naples, Italy. It is housed in a nineteenth-century cabinet with a late-eighteenth-century carved and gilded cornice.

FIGURES: polychromed terra-cotta heads with painted glass eyes, wooden limbs, and bodies of wire wrapped in hemp; clothing made variously of eighteenth- or nineteenth-century silks, cottons, linens, leather, and paper, some with metallic threads; some figures with additional elements in gold, silver, pearl, coral, ivory, bone, and wood; additional smaller figures composed entirely of polychromed terra-cotta or polychromed carved wood.

ANIMALS: polychromed terra-cotta, painted wood, iron, and lead; some with painted glass eyes and additional elements in leather, string, and metal.

OBJECTS: painted terra-cotta, copper, iron, silver or other metals, ceramic, wax, raw clay, paper, glass, fabric, string, straw, basket fibers, alabaster, and marble.

FURNITURE: wood, metal, leather, and fabric.

SETTING: cork, wood, papier-mâché, twigs, and moss, with watercolor and gouache.

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DETAILS

Front jacket: Mary and the Christ Child.

Back jacket: Overall view of the crèche.

Front flap: The angel known as the Glory of the Holy Spirit.

Endsheets: Clouds from the cyclorama.

Title page: An angel made by Angelo Viva.

Pages 8–9: Figures depicting daily life in Naples.

Pages 12–13: *Posteggiatori* (strolling musicians) entertaining patrons of the tavern.

Pages 62–63: An angel to the left of the ruins.

Pages 76–77: Sheep.

Pages 96–97: A man and a woman playing castanets.

Pages 112–13: Cured meat hanging in the tavern.

Pages 128–29: A goat on the way to the butcher.

Pages 142–43: The monkey, sitting next to the Magi's treasures.

Unless otherwise noted, all images are of the Art Institute's crèche. In many cases, elements of the crèche are reproduced larger than their actual size in order to show their details.

The Art Institute of Chicago is grateful to the following individuals for their generous support of the Neapolitan Crèche:

The Nativity, The Three Wise Men and Their Courts and Treasures, and The Musicians and Dancers, sponsored by Mr. and Mrs. James N. Bay.

The Heavenly Host, sponsored by Linda and Vincent Buonanno and Family in memory of Vincent Buonanno Jr.

The Tavern, sponsored by the Eloise W. Martin Legacy Fund.

La Georgiana and Her Companions, sponsored by Mrs. Robert O. Levitt.

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MUSIC AND THE NATIVITY IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY NAPLES

Jesse Rosenberg

MUSIC HAS A CONSIDERABLE PRESENCE in the Art Institute of Chicago's splendid mid-eighteenth-century Neapolitan Nativity scene, which features angels and shepherds, kings and tavern-goers playing a range of instruments including bagpipes, castanets, and guitars. This should come as no surprise, because while music is not explicitly mentioned in biblical accounts of the Nativity, it is deeply associated with the event's participants. According to the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke, shepherds "who kept watch over their flocks by night" beheld an angel whose announcement of Christ's birth was directly followed by a host of other angels praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to men of good will." An ancient church tradition holds that this cry of acclamation was sung.[1] Similarly, the image of angels dancing in paradise is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition and affirmed by Gregory the Great, John of Damascus, and other religious authorities.[2] Indeed, some of the angels in the Art Institute's crèche—or, in Italian, *presepe*—assume positions strongly suggestive of dance: arms held out, one leg behind the other, the torso slightly inclined.

Although Luke does not describe the shepherds as making music, their musical activities have long been familiar through literary references extending far back into antiquity. These allusions, which include pagan examples such as the piping herdsmen who figure among the decorations on Achilles's shield as described in the *Iliad*, were a centuries-old tradition by the time of Greek bucolic poetry and the harp-playing and psalm-composing David of the Hebrew Bible. In the Art Institute's crèche, one of the Wise Men visiting the Christ Child is fitted out with an exotic musical instrument, the Turkish crescent; this underscores not only the Wise Men's remote origins, which are already suggested by their dark complexions, but also the universal significance of the event depicted. Finally, the figures in the crèche, which vividly depict contemporary life with its earthly delights of eating, drinking, and dancing, are naturally assigned appropriate musical imagery.

A *posteggiatore*, or strolling musician.

The centrality of music making in the Neapolitan crèche is fitting, for if eighteenth-century Naples means anything at all in the history of European civilization, it means preeminence in musical culture. A number of Italian cities boast glorious musical traditions, and over the years their respective partisans have been eager to set forth their claims of supremacy. Florence, Milan, Rome, and Venice are among the cities with the most compelling arguments on their side, although other towns—Bologna, Ferrara, Mantua—emerge as strong contenders depending on the period and musical genre under consideration. However, if we limit the inquiry to the approximate date of the Art Institute's crèche and survey the Italian musical panorama between 1740 and 1760, the dispute becomes easy to resolve: Naples wins, hands down.

There are several reasons for this. Naples saw an immense increase in population in this period; by the

1 :

ANTONIO JOLI (Italian, 1700–1777). *View of Naples with the Castel Nuovo*, 1700/1800. Oil on canvas; 77.5 × 123.1 cm (30½ × 48⅞ in.). Sold, Christie's, London, July 5, 1985, lot 50.

2 :

Interior of the Teatro di San Carlo in Naples, 1817/44. Gouache on paper; 18.8 × 23.6 cm (7⅜ × 9⅜ in.). Musée Condé, Chantilly.

end of the eighteenth century, it had become the third largest city in all of Europe (SEE FIG. 1) It was therefore able to support a flourishing theatrical life that stretched across the social spectrum, from the highest aristocratic venues—most notably the Teatro di San Carlo (SEE FIG. 2) actually built into the side of the royal palace—to more popular establishments such as the Teatro de' Fiorentini and the Teatro Nuovo. For much of the century, no fewer than five opera theaters were staging productions, each of them, year after year, presenting new works in addition to revivals of recent ones. The sheer quantity of music that was produced and performed is striking. There was also an immense amount of musical activity carried out in ecclesiastical institutions: the cathedral and its Chapel of San Gennaro, other important churches, private chapels, confraternities, convents of various religious orders, and so forth. All of these places needed music and hired singers, instrumentalists, and composers.

This demand was met by no fewer than three musical conservatories. The term *conservatorio*, in eighteenth-century Naples, did not quite mean what it came to mean later—namely, a kind of university-level musical college. Rather, the city's conservatories originated in the sixteenth century as church-sponsored charitable institutions, essentially orphanages, that offered various kinds of vocational training to young boys starting around age eight; these included useful skills such as carpentry and masonry, as well as music, which only gradually became the focus of instruction. Music was simply the profession most in demand. As a result of this shift, conservatories began to attract pupils who were not orphans or other recipients of charity. Increasingly, these institutions' excellent reputations enabled them to draw a very different clientele: students who had to pass an entrance examination to be admitted, whose families were willing to pay tuition, and who were not even from Naples or the surrounding region. More important, the education they received was practical, thorough, and extremely effective; graduates entered directly into the profession, sometimes working in a church, sometimes in a theater, and very often both. Not only did the same composers who wrote operas also write sacred music, but they employed more or less the same musical style. This phenomenon was not limited to Naples; rather, it was evident in many parts of the Italian peninsula. Although some contemporary authorities and other listeners found it objectionable, it caused far less scandal in the eighteenth century than it would a century later, when ideals of a distinctly sacred, generally archaizing musical style began to be

3 : GIOVANNI BATTISTA PERGOLESI (Italian, 1710–1736). Handwritten title page for *Stabat Mater in Two Voices*, 1733. Conservatorio di Musica San Pietro a Majella, Museo Storico Musicale, Naples.

4 : DMITRY GRIGORIEVITCH LEVITZKY (Russian, 1735–1822). *Portrait of Ekaterina Nelidova as Serpina*, 1773. Oil on canvas; 164 × 106 cm (64⅝ × 41¾ in.). State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg.

promulgated.[3] Musicians trained at one of the Neapolitan conservatories found success not only throughout Italy but in Dresden, Lisbon, London, Madrid, Munich, Saint Petersburg, Stockholm, Stuttgart, and Vienna. In this way, Neapolitan music practically colonized Europe and made deep inroads into the Spanish holdings in the New World as well.

This comingling of sacred and secular—the combination of liturgical function with a musical style typically associated with dramas of earthly passion, jealousy, revenge, and comic mischief—may be viewed as a primary example of the "porosity" that the critic Walter Benjamin identified, in a celebrated 1925 essay written in collaboration with Asja Lacis, as a defining characteristic of Neapolitan life.[4] Their conceptual leap from the literal porousness of the stone cliffs on which the city rises to the metaphorical comingling of private and communal life, religious and secular architecture, is undoubtedly suggestive. Had the pair turned their attention to Neapolitan music in the eighteenth century, they could easily have adduced many further examples.

A prime instance is found in the work of Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, one of the most celebrated products of a Neapolitan conservatory, who enjoyed a brilliant but short career. The "Eja mater" movement of his setting of the *Stabat Mater*, a famous medieval Latin poem about the grief of Mary as she stands weeping by her crucified son, includes a variety of musical features—not only general ones such as tempo, meter, and mode, but also specific melodic phrases—that are virtually identical to those of "Morta tu mme vuoje vedere," an aria from *Lo frate 'nnamorato* (The brother in love; 1732), his comic opera in the Neapolitan dialect. There, Luggrezia expresses her unhappiness over the fact that Ascanio does not return her love. Pergolesi's approach may be seen as another sort of porosity, and, once one begins to take note of porosities in his works, they appear to multiply endlessly. Luggrezia's tragic-style aria, for instance, is satirically placed amid the plot's mistaken identities and other farcical goings-on. Indeed, eighteenth-century Neapolitan music more generally can be said to match in spirit the crèche's exuberant mixture of characters, all orbiting a miraculous event of utmost religious significance. Neapolitan custom, for example, also involved inserting comic operas between the acts of tragic ones, as was the case with Pergolesi's most successful comedy, *La serva padrona* (The servant turned mistress), and his serious opera *Il prigionier superbo* (The proud prisoner) (SEE FIG. 3), both of 1733. The plot of *La serva padrona* itself involves the intermingling of social classes, with a servant marrying her bourgeois employer (SEE FIG. 4). The strange reception of these two operas is telling: in 1733 the serious opera was the main course, the comic one the side dish. But in time *La serva padrona* became far more popular, the humbler theatrical genre usurping the position of the higher one. In opera, as in the crèche, humble and exalted elements enter into a lively dialogue with one another.

Moreover, the crèche has often been conceived in theatrical terms. The annual ritual of assembling and arranging the figures of a crèche is called in Italian an *allestimento*—literally "staging," the identical term used for the performance of plays and operas. In the liner notes to his *Cantata dei pastori* (Cantata of the shepherds; 1975), a noteworthy recent contribution to Neapolitan Christmas music, the singing actor Peppe

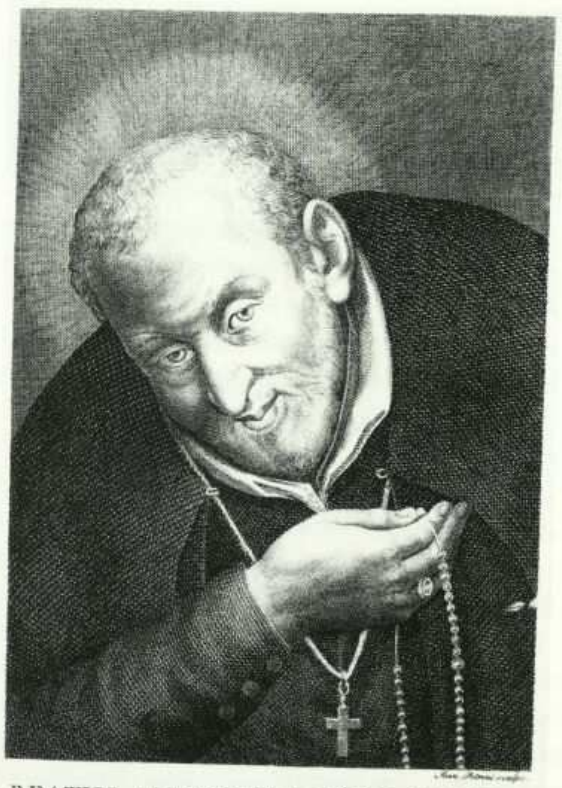
Barra employs other theatrical metaphors, referring to *scenografia* (scenography) and *interpreti* (interpreters, a common Italian designation for actors in a play or opera).[5] A crèche plays a central role in *Natale in casa Cupiello* (Christmas at Cupiello's) by the great Neapolitan actor, director, and playwright Eduardo De Filippo, first given as a one-act play in 1931 and later expanded into three acts. The hapless protagonist, Luca Cupiello, whose obsession with the annual rite of constructing the crèche at home is a leitmotif of the play, lies delirious in bed and mistakes his wife for Don Basilio, a character in Gioachino Rossini's *Barber of Seville*, which he has recently seen at the Teatro di San Carlo. There are also numerous interesting points of contact between De Filippo's masterpiece and Barra's childhood recollections of the crèche, including the smell of fish glue used for assembling the whole, the use of an enema to create the illusion of running water, the surpassing importance assigned to the shepherds (with relatively scant interest left over for the Holy Family), and the climactic moment when the completed scene was illuminated in an otherwise dark room. Barra's beautiful miniature memoir deserves to be quoted at length:

> *Since childhood I have always loved the presepe, which in my family used to be set up in the first days of December. It was of the poor type, constructed from materials available at home: wood, cardboard, old newspapers. In those days powdered paints of various hues were used, dissolved in water, for coloring the stones, mountains, and fields. We also made use of small dried branches, moss, and pebbles, which we children would amuse ourselves with by gathering well in advance. My home at that time was filled with unmistakable odors, still present in my memory. The predominant odor was that of fish glue. . . . The grotto of the baby became a little bit of everything. Lace embroideries, little stars made with silver thread, little angels' heads cut out from old greeting cards, a collage of simple baubles, and as tradition dictated, the sacred and the profane were fused in order to represent the Nativity. . . . My most beautiful recollections of this day are when in the dark, with all the lights in the room turned off, the presepe was illuminated, and I relished this moment, and dreamed, losing myself in every part of the presepe.*[6]

Despite Barra's comment on the fusion of the sacred and the profane in this representation of the Nativity, the sacred aspects of the scene are in fact barely evident in his description. Music, too, is missing, although for reasons having nothing to do with neglect: the memories themselves are merely a verbal supplement to his musical creation.

By contrast, De Filippo's *Natale in casa Cupiello* does feature music, but only once: at the conclusion of act 2, the highest point of tension in the drama. In an ironic reflection of classic crèche figures, Luca, his brother, and his son enter a room dressed as the Wise Men and place gifts at the feet of his distraught and distracted wife (SEE FIG. 5); each waves an illuminated star while singing the Christmas song "Tu scendi dalle stelle."[7] De Filippo may or may not have known that this song has deep Neapolitan roots going back to the eighteenth century, and that the music itself is of even more ancient origins. The words, originally in Neapolitan dialect, are attributed to Saint Alfonso Maria de' Liguori (SEE FIG. 6) and were later rendered in standard Italian as *Tu scendi dalle stelle* (You descend from the stars).[8] Liguori probably took the melody from

5 :
The finale of act 2 in Eduardo De Filippo's *Natale in casa Cupiello* as staged in the production directed by Nello Mascia at the Teatro Eliseo, Rome, 2012.



6 :
JOAN PETRINI (Italian, active 18th century). *Portrait of Saint Alfonso Maria de' Liguori*, 18th century. Engraving. Private collection.

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SANTO NATALE
COLLE
MEDITAZIONI
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OPERA
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II. Il Settenario in onore di S. Giuseppe.
III. L' Apparecchio, e Ringraziamento alla Messa per li Sacerdoti.
NELLA STAMPERIA DI BASSANO,
MDCCLXVI.
A SPESE REMONDINI.
Con Licenza de' Superiori, e Privilegio.

7 :
Title page and frontispiece of Saint Alfonso Maria de' Liguori's *Novena del Santo Natale* (Girolamo Flauto, 1759).

a southern Italian folk song. It is the height of irony that De Filippo brings in these verses at this juncture, since Liguori himself fought passionately to keep the religious aspects of the crèche from getting swallowed up by the secular ones, as attested by his *Novena del Santo Natale* (Christmas novena; 1759) (SEE FIG. 7).[9] "Many Christians," he intones, "are accustomed to prepare the *presepio* in their homes, well in advance [of Advent], in order to represent the birth of Jesus Christ in their homes, but few are those who think of preparing their hearts so that the child Jesus may be born within them and remain within them."[10] Further on, lest people get too carried away by the holiday spirit, he solemnly observes the following:

> *In the presepio, everything causes pain: everything is painful to the sight, because nothing is seen save dark, rough stones; everything is painful to the hearing, because nothing is heard save the noises of quadruped animals; everything gives pain to the sense of smell, because of the stink of the muck; and everything causes pain to the touch, because the cradle is nothing but a small manger, and the bed is made of nothing but straw.*[11]

And to the phrase from the Vulgate *Et reclinavit eum in praesepio* (And laid him in a manger; Luke 2:7), the saint provides the following gloss: "But oh, God, this bed is too hard, and uncomfortable for a newborn baby. The limbs of a baby are too delicate, especially those of Jesus, formed in an especially delicate way by the Holy Spirit, in order to make him more sensible to suffering."[12]

It is striking to think that such somber words were written by the author of "Tu scendi dalle stelle," which to Italian ears connotes the Christmas season as unequivocally as "Jingle Bells" does for Americans. Although Liguori nowhere proscribes music making directly before the crèche (the practice may well have struck him as bordering on the frivolous), within five years of his death, we find this custom explicitly mentioned by Giuseppe Maria Galanti, a proud and well-informed Neapolitan chronicler. Writing in 1792, Galanti informs us that at Christmas the people perform the devotion of the novena either in front of crèches (presumably those set up in churches) or before the shrines of the Madonna on the street, and that "men with bagpipes [*zampogne*] and other wind instruments, suited to this function, are brought in from the distant mountains."[13] Galanti's language, moreover, suggests a well-established custom, and modern musical performances in the presence of a crèche thus have a rich Neapolitan lineage.

Liguori enters into the musical discourse surrounding the crèche for reasons beyond "Tu scendi dalle stelle." In church history he is known for his work as a founder, not for the severity of his moralizing: his signal accomplishment was to establish the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer (known also as the Redemptorists), originally for the express purpose

8 :
Handwritten title page for Giuseppe Sigismondo's *Cantata per la Festività della Nascita di Nostro Signore Gesù Cristo* (1788–89). Library of the Conservatorio di Musica San Pietro a Majella, Naples.

of ministering to the poverty-stricken populace of the area around Naples.[14] That mission is undoubtedly related to the simple, almost childlike style he employed in the text, as well as his choice of a simple folk tune, in the characteristic rhythmic lilt of shepherds' piping, to get the point across musically. To put the matter differently, far more is involved in the adoption of this tune than musical realism (the goal of suggesting shepherds through the characteristic melodic turns of their traditional repertoire). Liguori's focus on the religious, material, and musical needs of the humblest class of Neapolitans directly corresponds to the presence of humbler social strata, shepherds included, among the figures in the crèche. At the same time, in both the saint's writings and the classic Neapolitan crèche, the attention directed to the poor and humble coexists not only with the most exalted spiritual meaning, but also with many elements reflecting the most elite class of society. Herein lies the principal social paradox of a crèche such as that in the Art Institute: although replete with humble images of common people, it is anything but folk art. To the contrary, it occupies the opposite end of the social spectrum, bearing the marks of master craftsmanship and intended to adorn the home of a member of the nobility. Much eighteenth-century Italian Christmas music embodies that same paradox, with its aural references to a humble outdoor environment in the context of a musical composition of utmost elegance and technical sophistication.

Giuseppe Sigismondo provides an excellent point of entry into this shared paradox, since he was both a gifted amateur composer of Christmas music and the liveliest of Baedekers, guiding readers through the streets, piazzas, palaces, and churches of eighteenth-century Naples in his massive, three-volume *Descrizione della città di Napoli e suoi borghi* (Description of the city of Naples and its neighborhoods).[15] Both his *Cantata per la Festività della Nascita di Nostro Signore Gesù Cristo* (Cantata for the festivity of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ) and the first two volumes of the *Description* date from the same year, 1788. Only one of Sigismondo's references to *presepi* corresponds to an assemblage of sculpted figures representing the Nativity scene; the others concern medieval and Renaissance paintings and bas-reliefs, none of which feature the populist touches present in the Art Institute's crèche.[16]

A musical manuscript of Sigismondo's cantata (SEE FIG. 8) may be understood as a reflection of his grounding in the artworks he described with such enthusiasm and pride. The composition has vocal parts for only three characters: Mary, Joseph, and the Archangel Gabriel, whom Joseph at first mistakes for a shepherd—the only reference to a shepherd in the cantata. Since Gabriel is not a shepherd, as he is quick to clarify, naturally the composer provides no music suggestive

of shepherds or the tunes that, by longstanding association, they were conceived as playing on their zampogne at this time of the year. And yet Sigismondo cannot resist including *zampogna*-like music in the slow central section of the overture. It is too deeply ingrained a musical association to dispense with, no matter how tenuous its relation to the business at hand.

The rich variety of musical instruments in the crèche must be seen in the context of this social heterogeneity. Some of these instruments, together with the figures depicted playing them, seem drawn from real life such as any Neapolitan must have experienced. This is certainly true of the guitars, originally a Spanish import and thus having deep roots on the Italian peninsula, so much of which was occupied (or colonized outright) by Spain from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. The castanet players likewise betray the strong Spanish influence on Neapolitan culture. The lute-shaped mandolin being played by a man at the right end of the tavern balcony may seem so Neapolitan as to amount to a cliché, but it traces its origins, as do all ovoid plucked instruments, to the Middle East; the fact that it is being plucked by the fingers rather than a plectrum itself bespeaks a more sophisticated style of music. The zampogna player and his natural musical companion, the pipe player, are both shepherds, recognizable as such by their fur outfits as well as by their instruments. The custom followed by these shepherds every Christmas season of coming into Rome and Naples from the countryside, playing their characteristic tunes, continues to this day. At the very bottom of the socio-musical scale is the primitive noisemaker known as the *triccheballacche*; here, the player knocks the two lateral hammers against a central one, and aside from the ability to keep time, needs absolutely nothing in the way of technique.

In strong contrast to these realistic representations of Neapolitan music making is the presence of the Turkish crescent. Although deriving, somewhat vaguely, from an instrument employed in the janissary bands of the Ottoman Empire, it appears to have undergone in Europe a kind of crossbreeding with a nonmilitary rattle with bells known as the *cewhan*. (The fact that the Turkish crescent is also known by such names as the Chinese hat and the Chinese pavilion suggests how muddled its origins actually are.) From the point of view of Neapolitan culture, its primary interest is as a preeminently Austrian symbol for Turkish exoticism. That the Austrians ruled over Naples from 1707 to 1734 may indeed lead one to suspect that the crescent player dates from well before mid-century. The instrument reflects the dimly remembered clangor of the janissary bands at the time of military battles between the Ottoman and Austrian empires, most notably the siege of Vienna in 1683, when only the thick fortress walls surrounding the city—today's Ringstrasse—saved it from falling to the Turks. There is no secure evidence that any eighteenth-century Neapolitan had ever heard one played in the city.

It is amusing to imagine the cacophony that would result if all of these real and implied musical acts indeed sounded at once, as the arrangement of figures in the Art Institute's crèche visually suggests. To say the least, the purportedly Turkish instruments, the shepherds' bagpipes, and the instruments accompanying the tarantella—not to mention that invisible heavenly music to which we may presume the angels are dancing—might produce a highly discordant effect. But before we categorize this as yet another instance of Neapolitan porosity, it would be well to take a step back and consider such a combined concert from a different perspective. Perhaps an implied religious message is more to the point, as the multiplicity of musical sounds also suggests the totality of experience that will be transformed by the Nativity. Rather than hearing the tarantella as somehow conflicting with the heavenly dance of angels, we may perceive the two dances as complementary, the first being the earthly analogue to the second. The presence of exotic instruments likewise points to the universal import of that same event, which is of significance to all of humanity. Such considerations reveal the principal drawback of porosity as an interpretive key to the crèche, however useful it is to an understanding of eighteenth-century musical culture. If the term denotes a characteristic comingling of elements from separate spheres, then much depends on whether or not the spheres are truly separate. A "porous" interpretation, in brief, is grounded in an arbitrary, but very human, tendency to divide things into categories falsely presumed to be antithetical—the profane versus the divine, for example—whereas the entire concept of the Nativity is based on the fusion of these two natures into one person, a defining dogma since the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451.

Other aspects of the crèche may be viewed as contributing to this unified religious vision as well. The pleasures of eating and drinking at the tavern, for example—a convenient emblem for sensuality in general, with its attendant risks of sinfulness—are depicted together with the figure whose advent holds out the promise of redemption from sin. The tarantella (SEE FIG. 9), for all of its secular connotations, has been danced in connection with the liturgy, as in the annual feast of the Madonna dell'Arco as celebrated in the church of that name near Naples, in addition to being part of Christmas celebrations in certain localities.[17]

9 :
PIETRO FABRIS
(Italian, active 1756–1804).
Tarantella with Posillipo in the Background, 18th century. Oil on canvas. Private collection.

And at the close of De Filippo's *Natale in casa Cupiello*, the dying Luca gazes into the distance to behold "a presepe as large as the world" (*un presepe grande come il mondo*) which the playwright meticulously describes to the reader (it naturally remains invisible to a theater audience).[18] The envisioned crèche presents a "joyous bustle" (*brulichio festoso*) of tiny human figures who hasten toward a humble dwelling, where a tiny donkey and a tiny cow are warming an enormous Christ Child with their breath. The scene is set forth as a kind of beatific vision that Luca takes in at the moment he enters paradise. The Neapolitan religious imagination, it seems, perceives unities which to others may appear as heterogeneities.

Musically speaking, the hybrid combination of rustic references and compositional elegance we see in eighteenth-century evocations of the Nativity has been powerful, influential, and in its own way unifying. The characteristic, gently rocking rhythm of "Tu scendi dalle stelle," with its unshakable associations with zampogna- and pipe-playing shepherds, emerged as the most readily identifiable aural symbol of shepherds and, by extension, of Christmas. This symbolism is clearly present in the *Cantata Pastorale per la Natività di Nostro Signore Gesù Cristo* (Pastoral cantata for the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ; c. 1700) by Alessandro Scarlatti, a musician so strongly associated with Naples as to earn the sobriquet "founder of the Neapolitan School," although he was Sicilian by birth and spent much of his career in Rome. The word *pastoral* in the title refers not to the countryside, but to the rhetorical addressees of the final recitative and aria, both addressed to the fortunate shepherds whose privilege it is to have been the first witnesses of the Nativity. The text of the final aria is as follows:

You, shepherds, were destined to be the first,
For Jesus is the Lamb of God.
Offer your hearts to his cradle,
See how lovely, how beautiful he is.
Leave your herds and your hut,
And abandon the little sheep.
There is hope in him that does not deceive,
And can give you a place among the stars.[19]

Scarlatti set these words in a way that he could count on contemporary audiences to understand: as an impossible-to-miss elaboration of "Tu scendi dalle stelle." But the most telling example of this association is found in Georg Frideric Handel's 1742 oratorio *Messiah*, which contains a number of references to shepherds as the first witnesses of the newborn Jesus. And for Handel, this called forth exactly the same musical response that it did for Scarlatti: the instrumental passage preceding the words "There were shepherds abiding in the fields" is clearly intended to suggest music played by *zampognari*—music by a German composer, performed for the first time in Dublin, in which we are surprisingly close to the spirit of a crèche made in Naples.

NOTES

Unless otherwise noted, translations are the author's.

1. Among the many comments in the patristic literature on angelic singing in connection with Luke 2:14, see Saint Gregory Thaumaturgus, "First Homily on the Anunciation to the Holy Virgin Mary," in *The Works of Gregory Thaumaturgus, Dionysius of Alexandria, and Archelaus*, trans. S. D. F. Salmond, Ante-Nicene Christian Library 20 (T. and T. Clark, 1871), p. 124; John Chrysostom, "Homily 68 on the Gospel of Matthew," in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 10, *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew* (Christian Literature Publishing, 1886), p. 418; and Saint Leo the Great, "Letter 69," in *Letters*, trans. Edmund Hunt, Fathers of the Church 34 (Fathers of the Chuch, 1957), p. 139. The idea that the angels sang rather than spoke was recently reaffirmed by Pope Benedict XVI, who nevertheless acknowledged the lack of explicit scriptural support for the idea; see his *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives* (Image, 2012), p. 73.

2. Eugène Louis Backman, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine* (Allen and Unwin, 1952).

3. The 1749 encyclical *Annus Qui* by Pope Benedict XIV, condemning the use of profane music in worship services, is one of many documents attesting to the controversy; see Anthony Ruff, *Sacred Music and Liturgical Reform: Treasures and Transformations* (Hillenbrand, 2007), p. 69.

4. This essay, titled simply "Naples," is often cited in the scholarly literature on the city and its cultural history. I intend no endorsement of the general validity of the interpretation provided there. Benjamin and Lacis were, after all, foreign tourists (although unusually brilliant ones) whose direct experience with Naples was confined to a brief visit in September 1925. The essay originally appeared in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Tillman Rexroth, vol. 4, pt. 1, *Kleine Prosa, Baudelaire-Übertragungen*, (Suhrkamp, 1972), pp. 307–15; an English translation is included in Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), pp. 163–73.

5. Peppe Barra, *La cantata dei pastori*, Marocco Music MARM004, 2004.

6. The original Italian reads, "Fin da bambino ho sempre amato il presepe, che nella mia famiglia veniva allestito, per tradizione, già dai primi giorni di dicembre. L'allestimento era quello povero, con l'impiego di materiali disponibili in casa, legno, cartone, carta di vecchi giornali. Allora si usavano i colori in polvere, da sciogliere in acqua, polveri di vario colore per colorare le rocce, le montagne, i prati. Servivano anche rametti secchi, muschio, ciottoli, che noi bambini ci divertivamo a raccogliere in giro già da molto tempo prima. La mia casa in quel periodo si riempiva di odori inconfondibili, ancora presenti nella mia memoria. L'odore dominante era quello della colla di pesce . . . La grotta della Natività, e questo tutti lo sapevano in famiglia, doveva essere opera di mia nonna, che interveniva in maniera perentoria, stroncando anche la dittatura di zia Maria. A questo punto la grotta del Bambinello diventava di tutto un po'. Ricami a tombolo, stelline fatte col filo argentato, testine di angioletti ritagliate da vecchie cartoline di auguri, insomma un collage di naif e chincaglierie, e come giustamente nella tradizione, il sacro e il profano si fondevano per rappresentare la Natività . . . I miei ricordi più belli di questo giorno erano quando al buio, spente tutte le luci della stanza, il presepe si illuminava e io assaporavo questo momento, e sognavo, immedesimandomi in ogni parte del presepe." Ibid.

7. Eduardo De Filippo, *Natale in casa Cupiello* (Einaudi, 1976), p. 54. The author is grateful to his dear Neapolitan friend Antonello d'Elia for drawing his attention to De Filippo's play.

8. The original title was "Quanno nascette Ninno a Betlemme" (When the Child was born in Bethlehem).

9. Alfonso Maria de' Liguori, *Novena del Santo Natale colle meditazioni per tutti i giorni dell'Avvento, fino all'ottava dell'Epifania* (Girolamo Flauto, 1759).

10. The original Italian reads, "Molti Cristiani sogliono per lungo tempo avanti preparare nelle loro case il Presepio, per rappresentare nelle loro case la nascita di Gesù-Cristo; ma pochi son quelli che pensano a preparare i loro cuori, affinchè possa nascervi in essi, e riposarvi Gesù bambino." Ibid., p. 10.

11. The original Italian reads, "Nel presepio tutto dà pena: tutto dà pena alla vista, perchè non si vede che pietre rozze e oscure: tutto dà pena all'udito, perchè altro non si sente, che voci d'animali quadrupedi: tutto dà pena all'odorato, per la puzza che vi è di letame: e tutto dà pena al tatto, perchè la culla non è altro che una piccola mangiatoja, ed il letto non è composto che di sola paglia." Ibid., p. 81.

12. The original Italian reads, "Ma oh Dio che questo letto è troppo duro, e penoso per un fanciullino di fresco nato! Le membra di un bambino sono troppo delicate, e specialmente le membra di Gesù, formategli con modo speciale delicate dallo Spirito Santo, affinchè foss'egli più sensibile alle pene." Ibid., p. 201.

13. Giuseppe Maria Galanti, *Breve descrizione della città di Napoli e del suo contorno* (Gabinetto Letterario, 1792), p. 270.

14. See his request to Pope Benedict XIV for permission to found the new congregation for this purpose: "Supplex libellus," *Spicilegium Historicum* 17 (1969), pp. 220–23. The Redemptorists now conduct their missionary work in many countries worldwide.

15. Giuseppe Sigismondo, *Descrizione della città di Napoli e suoi borghi* (Naples, Fratelli Terres, 1788–89). The entire work, edited by Stefano De Mieri and Maria Toscano, is available in digitized form courtesy of the Fondazione Memofonte at http://www.memofonte.it/ricerche/napoli.html#sigismondo.

16. Sigismondo tells us that in the church of Santa Maria in Portico, the Christmas novena is celebrated with a life-size crèche; ibid., vol. 3, p. 165.

17. Roberto De Simone, *Canti e tradizioni popolari in Campania* (Lato Side, 1979), pp. 169, 196.

18. De Filippo, *Natale in casa Cupiello*, p. 68.

19. The original Italian reads, "Toccò la prima sorte a voi pastori / Perchè si fa Gesù di Dio l'Agnello. / Offrite alla sua cuna i vostri cuori, / Mirate quanto è vago e quanto è bello. / Lasciate i vostri armenti e la capanna, / Abbandonate si le pecorelle. / V'è una speranza in lui che non v'inganna / E che vi può dar loco in fra le stelle."